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QUESTION PERIOD:

Strategies, Procedures, and Preparation

or

Alberta's Legislature Grows Up

Alberta Legislative Internship Paper
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For most Albertans, Oral Question Period is the most visible part of the legislative day. For 45 minutes each day during the session, the Members of the Legislative Assembly rise to call upon the government to defend, explain, or promote its actions to the people of Alberta.

What preparation goes into this political theatre? What roles do the political actors play? How does the audience react to the unfolding drama, or comedy as the case may be, performed five times a week on both radio and television? These are some of the questions that will be examined in this paper.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section outlines the rules, both formal and informal, that govern Question Period. The second section describes the preparation of the questions and answers. The third section looks at what each of the three political parties are asking, and compares the Alberta and Ontario legislatures in this respect. The reaction of the audience -- the media and Albertans -- is analyzed in section four. Section five is an assessment of Question Period as "the most significant proceeding" in a legislature.[1]

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[1] Graham White, The Ontario Legislature: A Political Analysis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 96.

The Rules of Question Period

Oral Question Period takes place mid-way through the daily legislative agenda, after the housekeeping duties of prayers, introduction of visitors, reading and receiving petitions, tabling of reports and the introduction of bills; but before the detailed debates on the Speech from the Throne, budget estimates, bills and motions. The only reference to Oral Question Period in the Alberta Legislature's Standing Orders is its place on the Order Paper, with the admonition that it should last "no longer than 45 minutes". In reality, Question Period lasts a few minutes longer, because the last member recognized is allowed to finish his or her series of questions.

As with its length, the other rules governing Question Period are not as they seem. The Alberta Legislature uses Beauchesne's Rules and Forms of the House of Commons of Canada as its rulebook. Citation 358 of Beauchesne (fifth edition) lists a number of do's and don't's, the most ironic being that every question should be "of urgency and importance" and "should not provoke debate". Of course, it would be an onerous and politically difficult task for the Speaker to decide which questions were indeed urgent, and often the most incisive questions are the ones that do provoke debate.

Three rules that are followed, with varying degrees of rigour, concern the admissibility of questions. Questions should not anticipate debate. That is, Members are not allowed to ask questions regarding matters that will be dealt with later the same

day in debate. Questions should not be hypothetical, but the Speaker usually leaves this rule for the cabinet ministers to point out, as when the Minister of the Environment, Ralph Klein, deflected questions on a review of a second ALPAC pulp mill proposal. Questions should not deal with a matter currently before the courts. The sub judice rule prohibits this, but some questions may be asked, depending upon how carefully the question is crafted, the decision of the Speaker regarding exactly what part of the matter is before the courts, and the willingness of the Minister to answer the question.[2]

The Speaker has remarkable leeway to enforce the rules in Question Period. Gerard Amerongen, Speaker from 1972 to 1986, often disallowed partisan preambles to questions so as to maintain fairness by respecting the distinction between debate and question period.[3] For his trouble, Mr. Amerongen was labelled a "political prig".[4] During the later years as Speaker, Mr. Amerongen allowed partisan comments during preambles to questions.

For Ray Speaker, one of the few members to have sat on both sides of the House, the "mini-editorial" is what is important.[5]

The preamble, it's the proper way because you give it

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[2] For examples, see questions on Gainers and Peter Pocklington during the Second Session of the 22nd Legislature.

[3] For Mr. Amerongen's view of Question Period rules, see Alberta Hansard, May 30, 1983, pages 1212 to 1214.

[4] Don Braid, Edmonton Journal, March 9, 1982, page A6 and April 26, 1985, page A7.

[5] Interview with Ray Speaker, Minister of Municipal Affairs, May 15, 1990.

> some flavour, give it the political twist, you take it in a certain direction, then you lay the question out ... You can ask a question and it can mean a lot of things [so] you've got to put it in its environment before you ask it ... As a minister you can respond to the flavour of the question as much as the question itself, and that lifts up the quality of the debate on the issue ... I'm much happier with [a politicized preamble], even as a government member, a minister that may get really hammered by that format.

At the same time, Ray Speaker admires the decorum of respect for which the Alberta Legislature is known, and hopes that the members remain "sensible" inside the House.

Other than the "political bite" that has been added to questions, the biggest change to Oral Question Period in the Alberta Legislature has been the change in the number of supplementary questions allowed by the Speaker. "Allowed" is a misnomer, as the number of supplementary questions, along with other procedures in the House, are negotiated among the Speaker and the House Leaders of the political parties. To explain this further, some history of the development of Question Period is required.

The start of modern Oral Question Period in Canadian legislatures is generally cited as its increased use during the Pipeline Debate in the House of Commons in 1956. Provincial opposition parties were slower to push for greater use of this political tool, instead concentrating on bill study, or criticism of the budget estimates.[6] Ray Speaker recalls that it was Peter

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[6] For a thorough study of the development of Question Period in Ontario, see the reports of the Ontario Commission on the Legislature (Camp Commission).

Lougheed as the Leader of the Official Opposition in the 1960's who pushed to take Question Period from its little-used place on the agenda and put it at the forefront of attention. Even then, however, it was "a loose arrangement, question and a whole series of supplementaries that just petered itself out".[7]

After the defeat of the Social Credit party in 1971, the Social Credit had trouble adjusting to its new role as the Official Opposition.[8]

> There were ministers that were with me that had been ministers for twenty, twenty-five years sitting in the legislature, and all they knew was government, and when they went to the opposition they still thought they were in government. We had a difficult time saying "look, you're no longer in government, our job is to be adversaries and to be critical, to hold the government accountable, and to create a situation where we're the window to the public, the other side of the issue. We just can't agree with the government". Some of my colleagues found that very, very difficult. They said, "well, if they're doing a good job, let's support them", but that wasn't our job. So the adversary role was very difficult. ... Most of the people raised questions about their constituency, tried to represent their constituents, [but] were not overly critical of the government.

After the 1975 election, the opposition was reduced from 26 to 6. The booming Alberta economy placed the opposition parties in an unusual position. The opposition research budget was increased but for the Official Opposition Social Credit Party:[9]

> we still weren't in a major adversary role, even then. It was difficult because between '75 and '79 those were just years of volumes of money coming into the

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[7] Interview with Ray Speaker.

[8] Interview with Ray Speaker.

[9] Interview with Ray Speaker.

> government. ... If people had a problem, you bought 'em off, handed them a grant. There was grant money flying all over the place. ... The heritage fund blossomed, projects went all over the place, so it was tough to be really adversarial in those times.

Question Period took on more importance after the New Democrats became the Official Opposition in 1982, and as the bloom on the Alberta economy started to fade. Question Period became a more lively affair, with questions followed by as many as nine or ten supplementaries. Pam Barrett, now New Democrat House Leader, was Grant Notley's assistant in 1983. She recalls that the "Conservatives were not scared of opposition, so engaged in more wide-ranging debate in Question Period, as opposed to skipping, except if the issue was really, really hot like Dial Mortgage".[10] Ray Speaker agrees: "There were only four of us; we weren't going to overthrow the government".[11]

After the 1986 election, the opposition numbered 22 -- 16 New Democrats, 4 Liberals, and 2 members of the Representative Party. It was obvious that the existing Question Period structure would not work with an increased opposition. The opposition leaders' questions with many supplementaries would use up almost the entire 45 minutes. The Speaker and the House Leaders agreed on three supplementaries for each question.

"Piggyback" supplementaries also survived the first round of changes. "Piggyback" supplementaries allowed the opposition

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[10] Interview with Pam Barrett, New Democrat House Leader, May 24, 1990.

[11] Interview with Ray Speaker.

parties and government backbenchers to ask a supplementary question on each others' questions. After the 1989 election, this practice was dropped, in return for the loss of one supplementary to questions. Pam Barrett says that she has always been opposed to the "tag on" supplementaries because they "dragged on Question Period and had limited value. If you want in on an issue, raise it yourself."[12]

Ms. Barrett has a reason to be defensive on that point. Ray Speaker recalls his experience as Leader of the Representative Party:[13]

> If you could ask the right question [on the piggyback], we could steal the headline. And you know, Nick [Taylor] did it often too, with his antics. So when this term came, the NDP didn't want a piggyback question ... because then it would give the Liberals a chance of stealing the thunder on their questions.

Government backbenchers also used the piggyback to give a minister another opportunity to deflate some of the opposition's arguments.

Bettie Hewes, the Liberal House Leader, liked the extra supplementaries, but admits:[14]

> When you use up your time piggybacking on somebody else's questions, you get fewer questions from your caucus ... so we gave up the notion of using their questions in order to have more from ours.

For the 1990 spring session of the Legislature, House Leaders could not agree on the Question Period format. The Speaker

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[12] Interview with Pam Barrett.

[13] Interview with Ray Speaker.

[14] Interview with Bettie Hewes, Liberal House Leader, June 12, 1990.

suggested that one less supplementary to questions other than leaders' questions be allowed, to "enable more members to participate in question period".[15]

Alberta's Question Period now resembles the Question Period of the House of Commons, except that government backbenchers ask approximately one in every five questions. In Ottawa, backbenchers' participation is limited to one in eight.

With the number of variables that make up Question Period -- the length of the preambles, the number of supplementaries, and the rotation among parties -- many different versions of Question Period are possible. It must be remembered, however, that the final outcome is part of a political bargaining process. Question Period is but one bargaining chip. For example, the Liberals have pushed for subcommittees in debate on the estimates. The New Democrats want more power over their bills and motions on the Order Paper. The Government House Leader balances the time needed for government business with the demands for participation by his caucus, and the need to appear fair, in the public's eyes at least, to the opposition. A complete assessment of the bargaining would look at the total legislative agenda, a task beyond the scope of this paper.

Question Period Preparation

Michael Kalnay describes Ottawa's Question Period as "managed

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[15] Alberta Hansard, March 9, 1990, page 5.

mayhem" because the raucous and seemingly spontaneous questions and answers are really researched, tightly scripted, and rehearsed. Alberta's Question Period is a little less managed, with a little less mayhem because of influences varying from the leadership style of the premier to the architecture of the Assembly itself.

For the New Democrat Official Opposition each morning during session, preparation for Oral Question Period starts as the caucus researchers roll out of their beds and listen to the first newscast of the day. The caucus cannot afford a clipping service, so it is up to each M.L.A. and researcher to be aware of the media response to previous questions, and keep an eye out for new issues. The research director and the four researchers have glanced at the Edmonton Journal and Sun newspapers before they sit down to the daily research meeting at 8:30 a.m. to prepare a tentative Question Period line-up which the research director suggests to caucus executive later in the morning.

Each researcher keeps track of five or six government departments, advises the M.L.A.s responsible in these critic areas, and drafts bills, motions, questions and background papers. Members are expected to write their own speeches, and draft amendments to bills. For researchers, Question Period is the top, if somewhat daunting, priority. One researcher describes his job:

> You've got to remember that when I research Question Period material, I'm up against six cabinet ministers, maybe eight or twelve executive assistants and special assistants, not to mention six entire government department bureaucracies ... I love my job.

At the research meeting, each researcher describes the

ministers' and the media's responses to the previous day's questions. Further questions on an issue are considered. New issues are analyzed with the research director playing devil's advocate with the researchers' suggestions. Ideas for Question Period material come from the media, from a researcher's own work, from interest groups, from caseworkers or constituency assistants who become aware of a problem while helping individuals, or on very few lucky occasions, from anonymous information or "brown envelopes".

This process of media analysis and question consideration is repeated in caucus executive at 9:00 a.m. on Mondays, 9:30 a.m. Tuesday through Thursday. Caucus executive consists of the caucus chairperson, the leader, the house leader, whip, Edmonton caucus chairperson, an M.L.A. from Calgary (since "Calgary caucus" consists of only two members), and the strategic planning committee chairperson. The M.L.A.s are joined by the director of research, the leader's policy advisor, and the director of communications. These three staff members share the duty of monitoring the media for caucus executive. They begin the meeting by summarizing the line-up from the previous day's television coverage, then everyone discusses possible questions and their relative political importance. By 10:00 or 10:30 a.m. a tentative list is posted. Most members ask researchers to draft the questions, and prepare any background material that will be released to the media. Usually several supplementaries are prepared in anticipation of the possible answers to the first question. The leader's questions are

prepared by his policy advisor together with the appropriate researcher.

Except on Fridays, when all of caucus meets before the morning sitting, only M.L.A.s who are on caucus executive have direct input into the decision of the Question Period line-up. "Backbench" New Democrat M.L.A.s must lobby a member of caucus executive to bring a question to the fore. An organized M.L.A. will submit draft questions to the caucus chairperson, and ask a researcher to prepare information on the issue. When asked about the preparation of the list, the director of research comments:[16]

> The setting of the list every day is a process of allocating finite resources and therefore is a highly political process ... a process where you have to stand and deliver. And the people who are best at standing and delivering -- making your case in a concise, persuasive way -- they're the ones who get on the list ... it's a relatively fair process, [there is an] opportunity to make suggestions.

Caucus meets at 1:30 p.m., Monday to Thursday, and 8:30 a.m. on Friday, to set the final version of the line-up, which is then sent to the Speaker's office. After caucus, members have one half hour to polish up their questions or have a researcher type a final draft, and rehearse the questions.

The Liberal caucus operates somewhat differently than the New Democrat caucus. Fewer staff, but all of caucus have direct input into the setting of the line-up. The policy chairperson (an M.L.A.), chief of staff, and the leader's executive assistant meet

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[16] Interview with Kim Pollock, Alberta New Democrat Caucus Director of Research, June 15, 1990.

each morning to determine the issues of the day, and suggest an order for the line-up. Usually caucus meets only once a day, at 11:00 a.m. to discuss possible questions and negotiate an order. New issues might come up at the caucus meeting, but these are usually left for the next day's list. Caucus meets again to change the line-up if an issue breaks during the morning. The line-up is sent to the Speaker's office at 1:30 p.m..

The Liberal Chief of Staff determines the level of research needed for each question. Researchers brief the members on the issues behind the questions. Members either write their own questions or the Chief of Staff prepares a set for them.

A major concern to the Liberals is how to adjust their questions in response to the New Democrats, who ask the first two sets of questions:[17]

> We write our own, decide what we think are the significant items for the day, then we have factor in what we believe the NDs are going to use. Then we have to cut and fit and make sure that our question is probably a different angle if we want to stay on the same subject ... In other words, we have to have three questions for their one. And it is something that has to be taken into consideration. It's awkward and puts us in a rough spot.

The Liberal line-up may change once or twice during the Question Period if a minister does not show, or if the order needs to be changed in response to previous questions. In this case, the House Leader sends a note to the Speaker requesting a change.

Mrs. Hewes takes a catalogue of prepared, "back-up" questions

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[17] Interview with Bettie Hewes.

with her into the House, so that members are not left without questions if the topic is covered by other parties. Despite this, the Liberals have been caught once or twice this session by Premier Getty for repeating questions asked by the New Democrats.

Only once inside the House, do the opposition members know for certain if the minister who they intend to question will attend Question Period. The government's absence list is only a rough guide to the cabinet's attendance. After prayers, members raise their hands to be recognized by the Speaker as he notes any changes to the lists submitted to him earlier in the day. This polite custom has the unintended effect of alerting the cabinet ministers to which opposition critics intend to raise questions.

Cabinet ministers usually know when a government backbench M.L.A. intends to ask a question. Generally, the member informs the minister during caucus. Preparation for these backbench questions is considerably less complicated than for opposition questions. Questions are usually based on constituency concerns, or are suggested by ministers to highlight some government initiative. Government M.L.A.'s usually write their own questions. Government caucus researchers are rarely involved in Question Period preparation. Their time is spent preparing speeches and bill notes for the members, and dealing with constituency concerns. As with the other caucuses, the Government House Leader forwards a list of questioners to the Speaker's Office before Question Period.

For all the preparation that goes into questions, the

government is under no formal obligation to answer. Ministers ignore questions at their political peril, however, and so considerable effort goes into preparing ministers to meet the daily onslaught.

The job of cabinet ministers became increasingly complex with the explosion of government programs in the 1960's and 1970's, and more difficult with the budget restraint of the 1980's and 1990's. When Ray Speaker was a Social Credit cabinet minister in the late 1960's, the typical staff in a minister's office was a secretary, sometimes two. There were also fewer senior bureaucrats such as assistant deputy ministers. Cabinet ministers were "on their own":[18]

> For Question Period it was whatever seemed to come up through the department, and whatever you happened to see in the paper. You had to get out and ferret out the information on your own -- you had to defend your own bastion, whereas now every minister's office has got an executive assistant, and some have special assistants to read the papers. I don't even read the papers any more ... somebody reads them for me. If they find something in there they show me the article. Then if there's information to be gotten then somebody runs and gets it for you and presents it to you.

To some extent, ministers are still "on their own". Unlike Ottawa, there is no central coordination to ensure that ministers are ready for issues that might arise, although this has varied with the leadership style of the premier. Premier Lougheed was known for his "hands-on" approach to government.

In 1970, Ray Speaker was one of four ministers allowed to hire

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[18] Interview with Ray Speaker.

an executive assistant[19]. This administrative innovation gave the ministers more time for the political organization leading up to the 1971 election.

Twenty years later, every minister has an executive assistant, and some have special assistants for briefings on specific portfolio responsibilities. Ray Speaker is briefed daily by his executive assistant. He also meets with the department's deputy minister every Monday, plus one other time for a total of two or three hours a week.

Briefings vary from minister to minister, but all feature a variation of the ministerial briefing binder: a catalogue of issues and department programs each condensed to key points to emphasize or avoid. Files and flash cards are also used to ensure that ministers are aware of an issue before it gets raised in the House.

Michael Kalnay writes that Question Period briefing is an important step in keeping government responsible since:[20]

> whether or not a question is asked ... the preparatory work in the department has already brought the matter to the attention of the minister and that action has often been taken to correct or deal with any concerns that might be raised before they become "real" issues.

Ray Speaker puts it more simply: "That's our job. We should know

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[19] The ministers of education, municipal affairs, social development (Mr. Speaker) and the premier.

[20] Michael Kalnay, "Meeting the Onslaught" in Parliamentary Government, Volume 8, Number 4 (Summer 1989), p. 7.

most of these things."[21]

Knowing the answer to a question and saying it in the House are two different matters. Since most opposition questions involve criticism of some government policy, a standard response is to deflect the criticism and quickly move on to what the government is doing in the same policy area. Other techniques include faulting the opposition's research, responding to the rhetoric of the preamble instead of to the question,[22] repeating a series of stock answers, and criticizing the opposition's stand on the issue.[23]

With the size of government departments, it is impossible for ministers to be aware of every situation. When faced with a question to which they do not know the answer, some ministers try to bluff, but the most honest response is to take the question on notice -- that is, to promise to investigate and report back to the House. Even then, ministers try to put the best light on their ignorance, as did Ray Speaker when questioned by Ed Ewasiuk (N.D.,

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[21] Interview with Ray Speaker.

[22] Labour Minister Elaine McCoy neatly deflected Ray Martin's questions on the cost of newspaper ads publicizing the government's position on the social workers' strike. See Alberta Hansard, May 14, 1990, pages 1200 and 1201.

[23] The master of deflection is considered by many to be Treasurer Dick Johnston. He dances around a question in the House, but sometimes gives a straight answer later outside the House to reporters. For a good example of the use of the above techniques during intense protracted questioning, read Alberta Hansard for comments made by John Oldring, Minister of Family and Social Services who weathered the questions on the 1990 social workers' strike surprisingly well. "Mr. Speaker, this government does care ...".

Edmonton - Beverly) on why a family faced a 21 per cent rent increase from the Alberta Mortgage and Housing Corporation:[24]

> we can always pick the one example that may be the unusual, where something has happened. That sort of a ploy is often used when you're sitting in the role of opposition: you try and take one specific and generalize into the broad program area, which is often done. In this circumstance, it's a good try. ... I'd appreciate it if the member would tell me who it is, and we'll look at it.

Members on both sides of the House agree that no matter how extensively a person prepares, sometimes the words do not come easily, even to experienced politicians, under the glare of the television lights. "It's a heck of a lot easier to answer questions", recalls Jerry Doyle (N.D., West Yellowhead), a former mayor of Edson. Another former mayor, Solicitor General Dick Fowler, is reported to have suffered nightmares in anticipation of his introduction to Question Period.

In some respects, Question Period is a series of solo performances. One New Democrat staff member who worked at Queen's Park in Toronto commented on how the architecture of the legislature influences how the politics are played out. At Queen's Park, M.P.P.'s enter and leave the Assembly more easily than in Alberta. Advisors also have a space on the floor of the Assembly, albeit behind and beside the Speaker's chair. These differences allow Ontario politicians to easily receive advice while they are in the Assembly. In Alberta, however, once the members are in the Assembly "on stage", they are on their own.

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[24] Alberta Hansard, June 12, 1990, page 1819.

Question Period Content

So now, with the scripts prepared and the stage set, what do the players play? What do the Members of the Legislative Assembly ask during Question Period and what does this indicate about the political parties in Alberta?

The following table categorizes the questions asked in the Alberta Legislature from March 9 to June 8, 1990. Although this period does not represent an entire sitting of the House, the number of questions represents a sizable sample of all questions asked during the sitting. June 8 was also chosen as it was to have been the last day of the sitting, at least according to estimates made earlier in the year. The subjects correspond roughly to the ministers' portfolios except for "executive council" which refers to the conduct of cabinet or government members (mostly questions regarding conflict of interest) and "legislative offices" which refer to the Ombudsman and the Auditor General.

No minister escaped questioning from at least one of the three parties. Because of the large number of subjects (35) very few subjects make up more than three per cent of the total questions asked. Still, one per cent of the total represents 15 questions or 7 opportunities to raise an issue.[25] If the media report half of these attempts, the coverage could potentially reach a large proportion of Albertans.

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[25] Supplementaries are counted as separate questions because several subjects can be raised during a series of questions.

ALBERTA
Questions by subject and party 1990 (percentages)

Subject	P.C.	N.D.	Lib.	Total
Executive council	-	6.40	.91	3.44
Legislative offices	-	.53	-	.26
Personnel / pensions	-	.53	4.10	1.46
Public works	4.65	1.06	1.37	1.92
Lotteries	2.48	.26	4.10	1.85
Public safety	.62	.26	-	.26
Intergovernmental affairs	8.70	1.73	6.61	4.63
Municipal affairs	1.86	-	.46	.53
Total: Gov't management	18.32	10.77	17.55	14.35
Health	5.59	6.26	2.51	5.03
Housing	5.00	2.40	2.73	3.04
Family and social services	4.04	7.33	11.16	7.74
AADAC	.93	.80	-	.60
Total: Social affairs	15.56	16.79	16.40	16.41
Attorney General	1.24	2.80	.68	1.85
Solicitor General	4.35	5.20	.91	3.77
Consumer & Corporate aff.	1.86	.26	-	.53
Total: Enforcement	7.45	8.26	1.59	6.15
Education	3.73	1.60	3.19	2.51
Advanced education	3.42	3.60	5.47	4.10
Career development	1.86	.53	-	.66
Labour	1.55	7.07	2.51	4.57
Occupational health	-	4.00	2.28	2.65
W.C.B.	-	.13	-	.07
Total: Education & labour	10.56	16.93	13.45	14.56
Treasury/economics	2.48	9.87	6.83	7.41
Economic development	3.42	1.33	.46	1.52
Energy	6.83	.93	.68	2.11
Agriculture	10.87	3.60	6.61	6.02
Transportation/utilities	8.07	.26	1.37	2.25
Tech/research/telecomm.	2.48	6.80	7.97	6.22
Total: Economic affairs	34.15	22.79	23.92	25.53
Environment	6.52	17.20	17.54	15.02
Recreation & parks	.62	.80	-	.53
Tourism	-	.53	.91	.53
Forestry, lands & wildlife	5.00	1.20	4.10	2.65
Total: Environmental aff.	12.14	19.73	22.55	18.73
Women's issues	-	1.73	.46	.99
Culture/multiculture	1.86	1.86	3.42	2.32
Senior citizens	.93	-	.46	.33
Native/Metis affairs	-	1.06	.23	.60
Total: Interest groups	2.79	4.65	4.57	4.24
N	322	750	439	1511

Source: Calculated from Alberta Hansard, March 9 to June 8, 1990.

The environment is the most widely asked subject. Both the Liberals and the New Democrats asked 17 per cent of all their questions on the environment. The Liberals asked four per cent of their questions on forestry, lands and wildlife, compared to one per cent for the New Democrats. This difference could be explained by the Liberals' second opposition party status. When planning their questions, the Liberals must avoid questions asked by other parties. Since the New Democrats rarely ask both environment and forestry questions on the same day, it is convenient for the Liberals to take a different angle by questioning a different minister on an issue. The Progressive Conservatives devoted 6.5 per cent of all their questions to the environment and five per cent on forestry, lands and wildlife, mostly to give the ministers an opportunity to further defend the policy stands taken by the government.

Economic issues were popular with all three parties, although the Conservatives concentrated on economic development, while the opposition probed the fallout from various failures, such as Gainers and trust companies. The Liberals concentrate on government waste and mismanagement in several areas such as lotteries and public service pensions.

The largest area of concern for the Progressive Conservatives was agriculture (11 per cent). This is not surprising as most of the government backbenchers represent rural constituencies. Compared to the opposition parties, the government M.L.A.s asked proportionately more questions on transportation and utilities,

public works, public safety, and municipal affairs.

It is also interesting to note which subjects the parties avoid. Surprisingly, opposition parties asked less than one per cent each of their questions on energy. This is a major change from the 1970's and 1980's when energy issues dominated the Alberta political agenda. Federal/provincial agreements and relative price stability have made energy just another economic issue, although the industry is just as important economically to the province now as it was in the 1970's and 1980's.

Parties try to avoid subjects on which they are vulnerable. For example, the Liberals asked only one per cent of their questions on the conduct of executive council, compared to six per cent for the New Democrats. Once bitten, twice shy. During the summer of 1989, Premier Getty countered Bettie Hewes' questions on patronage by recalling Mrs. Hewes' appointment by a Liberal prime minister to the presidency of Canadian National Railways.

The Conservatives, being the governing party, stayed away from patronage and conflict of interest questions. Curiously, several policy areas were neglected, such as occupational health and safety, tourism, women's issues, and native affairs. Since it is relatively easy for backbench M.L.A.s to ask "puffball" questions of the ministers, this could indicate a lack of caucus support for the ministers in these areas. In particular, Occupational Health and Safety Minister Peter Trynchy was consistently criticized by the opposition parties for his department's lack of action on various issues. Environment Minister Ralph Klein faced even

stiffer questioning, yet government M.L.A's asked many questions, as noted above.

The New Democrats asked proportionately fewer questions than the other parties on intergovernmental affairs. There are several reasons for this. It is a strong issue for the Conservatives. Premier Getty appears very statesmanlike when answering questions on Senate reform and Meech Lake, so the New Democrats are unwilling to provide another opportunity for Premier Getty to score political points. These questions also take time and attention away from the issues on which the New Democrats want to concentrate, such as protecting the environment and providing quality services to people. New Democrats also find it difficult to position on constitutional affairs generally, and on other issues that divide Canadian society along lines other than that of class structure. For example, the New Democrats are "less comfortable" with regional issues and try to turn these issues into an "us versus them" situation. In this way, Ray Martin gave a left populist slant on "fed-bashing" in the questions on the sale of Alberta Government Telephones by defining the issue as "the powerful and privileged eastern, moneyed interests [e.g. the federal regulator the C.R.T.C. and Bell Telephones] as opposed to the ordinary working people of Alberta".[28]

A comparison between the questions asked in Alberta with those asked in Ontario features some interesting similarities and

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[28] Interview with Kim Pollock.

contrasts. The following table categorizes the questions asked by subject and party in Ontario 1986-87. In Ontario, the governing Liberals asked proportionately more questions on the environment (17 per cent) than either of the opposition parties. Like the Alberta Liberals, the Ontario Progressive Conservatives concentrated on government management and industrial development questions. The New Democrats in both legislatures highlighted labour and social affairs questions. New Democrats in Ontario also asked many questions on consumer and commercial affairs, mostly regarding auto insurance rates. The Ontario opposition parties paid much more attention to health issues, especially extra-billing. Interestingly, the government backbenchers stayed clear of the controversial issue, unlike in Alberta, where government backbenchers asked several questions on the social workers' strike. Another large difference was in the number of questions asked by the government backbenchers. The Liberals asked only one in every fourteen questions, compared to Alberta's one in five. Despite having twice as many M.P.P.'s than the New Democrats, the Official Opposition Progressive Conservatives asked only slightly more questions. In Ontario, the recognition of members during question period is set out in the standing orders and follows normal debating rotation, except that government backbenchers are not allowed questions until the second round of questions.

Alberta and Ontario are also similar in the extent to which Question Period is dominated by the leaders of the parties. The following table shows the percentage of questions asked by party

ONTARIO
Questions by subject and party 1986-87 (percentages)

Subject	P.C.	N.D.	Lib.	Total
Government management	11.0	2.4	-	6.3
Intergovernmental affairs	.1	1.8	-	.9
Municipal affairs	3.1	1.6	1.7	2.3
Total: Gov't management	14.2	5.8	1.7	9.5
Health	14.0	11.7	1.7	12.1
extra-billing	7.5	5.7	-	6.1
Housing	5.4	7.2	.8	5.9
Community/social services	3.9	6.5	4.4	5.1
Total: Social affairs	30.8	31.1	6.9	29.2
Attorney General	5.8	1.9	10.6	4.4
Solicitor General	3.1	1.0	4.4	2.2
Correctional services	.4	.9	.8	.7
Consumer & commercial	3.2	11.7	6.2	7.3
Total: Enforcement	12.5	15.5	22.0	14.6
Education	3.0	3.1	1.7	2.9
Colleges & universities	2.0	1.8	2.7	2.2
Labour/W.C.B.	2.8	13.4	1.7	7.6
Total: Education & labour	7.8	18.3	6.1	12.7
Economy	5.6	5.7	4.4	5.6
Revenue	.7	.4	3.5	.8
Industry & trade	10.6	3.2	.8	6.5
Energy/Ont. Hydro	1.5	2.9	.8	2.1
Agriculture	5.6	1.5	10.6	4.1
Northern affairs & mines	1.3	3.7	.8	2.4
Transportation	3.4	1.0	1.7	2.2
Total: Economic affairs	28.7	18.4	22.6	23.7
Environment	5.1	9.7	17.6	8.1
Tourism & recreation	1.5	.4	2.7	1.1
Natural resources	1.7	2.1	1.7	1.9
Total: Environmental aff.	8.3	12.2	22.0	11.1
Women's issues	2.0	3.3	-	2.5
Citizenship & culture	1.2	.3	11.5	1.5
Senior citizens	1.1	.1	5.3	.9
Total: Interest groups	4.3	3.7	16.8	4.9
N	744	721	113	1579

Source: Adapted from Table 4.2 in Graham White, The Ontario Legislature: A Political Analysis, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1989, page 102.

leaders and by backbenchers to the premier and to cabinet ministers. One fifth of all questions are directed to the premiers. Thirty-four to forty per cent of the opposition leaders' questions are directed to the premier, although the New Democrats in both provinces are less likely than other opposition parties to question the premier. Alberta Liberals often direct the first question to a cabinet minister, and then redirect the last supplementary to the premier. Alberta government backbenchers question the premier considerably more often than Ontario backbenchers, perhaps reflecting Premier Getty's emphasis and interest in Senate reform and constitutional affairs.

The "what" and "who" of Question Period highlight the differences between the political parties in Alberta, but that is only part of the story. Why do members ask what they do, and why do they ask these questions in this particular public forum? The overwhelming reply to both questions is: to get media attention.

The Question Period Audience

Like the success of a play or a movie, success in Question Period is gauged by the reaction of the audience. Day in, day out, one of the most loyal spectators to Alberta's Question Period is the Legislative Press Gallery, one of the largest in Canada.[27] Through the Press Gallery, the government and the opposition can

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[27] Robert J. Fleming (ed.), Canadian Legislatures, 1987/1988 (Ottawa: Ampersand Communications Services Inc., 1988), page 96. Only the galleries in Ottawa and Quebec City have more members.

ALBERTA
Leaders' and back-benchers' questions 1990 (percentages)

	Conservative		New Democrat		Liberal		
	Leader	Back-bencher	Leader	Back-bencher	Leader	Back-bencher	Total
To premier	-	7	38	10	40	17	18
To minister	-	93	62	90	60	83	82
N	-	322	235	515	132	307	1511

Source: Calculated from Alberta Hansard March 9 to June 8, 1990.

ONTARIO
Leaders' and back-benchers' questions 1986-87 (percentages)

	Conservative		New Democrat		Liberal		
	Leader	Back-bencher	Leader	Back-bencher	Leader	Back-bencher	Total
To premier	34	20	33	13	-	1	20
To minister	66	80	67	87	-	99	80
N	213	531	211	510	-	113	1579

Source: Graham White, The Ontario Legislature: A Political Analysis, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1989, page 100.

reach their target audience: the voters of Alberta.

> The main thing that any political party has to do, and particularly an opposition party, is to get the message out to the folks, to tell people what it is that party stands for, what kind of different version of government that party represents. ... Question Period offers [the opposition] an opportunity to get into news stories in a big way by either initiating stories, or by putting our "spin" on stories the media are going to cover anyway.[28]

The news media are an imperfect medium to communicate this message. There are no guarantees that the media will be fair in their coverage, or give credit for a policy to the proper source. Even if a reporter does present all the sides to a story, time and space considerations are paramount for the editors. It is also far from certain whether the media covers the issues, or creates or ignores them by focusing on a mere 45 minutes in the legislative day. Former Speaker Gerard Amerongen is critical of the changes in the tone of Question Period over the past few years and blames the media for this:[29]

> Question Period is nothing more than a media event. It's much more effective to stick to the business of the House and avoid personal attacks. I was constantly badgered for depriving the media of easy stories. It's easier to write up a riot.

The depth of coverage suffers by concentrating on Question Period. "It's hard to make the connection between issues because there are so many things happening ... there are potentially six or seven stories from one Question Period" explains Don Wanagas,

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[28] Interview with Kim Pollock.

[29] Frank Dolphin, The Alberta Legislature: a celebration (Edmonton: Plains Publishing Inc., 1987), page 48.

president of the Alberta Press Gallery.[30] Yet the opposition parties rarely ask all of their questions on one subject, on the assumption that the greater the variety of subjects, the higher the probability that one of them will be covered by the media. "Most days, the objective is simply to get as many of our questions into the news as we possibly can."[31]

Superficial coverage of the issues is also caused by the pressure of deadlines on reporters. Radio reporters face hourly deadlines. Television reporters provide stories for the major local newscasts at six p.m., a mere two hours after the end of question period. Even print reporters and columnists do not have the luxury of time. After chasing down Members of the Legislature for comments or further information, Don Wanagas often does not sit down to start writing his column until 4:30 p.m.. His deadline is 6:00 p.m. for the next day's edition. Mr. Wanagas says that he prefers the off-session time because:[32]

> you're not depending on something that lasts an hour in the middle of your workday to generate your material. You're starting on something earlier in the day and devoting more time to it because you don't have the pressure of the Question Period every day. Off-session is more investigative than reactive.

So why depend on Question Period for a story if reporters have time to do little more than react, not analyze, the issues?

> It's the only time basically, where you're in an adversarial political system ... on a daily basis.

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[30] Interview with Don Wanagas, May 18, 1990.

[31] Interview with Kim Pollock.

[32] Interview with Don Wanagas.

> That's where journalists and the media are drawn because that's where the issues of the day are basically played out politically. ... That's where the politicians perform, that's the stage, that's where the media is focused. They're playing for us and we're going there because we know that's where they're going to play. It's a symbiotic relationship in a sense, not one that I always think is healthy in a lot of respects.[33]

It is difficult to determine the extent to which the media influence the content of Question Period. The government, the opposition, and the media are all trying to gauge the prevailing public interest. Politicians must address the concerns and interests that are relevant to the people they hope to represent in order to attract votes. The media do the same in order to attract viewers, listeners or readers. Some politicians sympathize with the media's focus on Question Period and accept it, convinced that media are the most efficient and effective means to attract voters. Bettie Hewes adds this warning:[34]

> Although the daily hits are important, you have to achieve a balance. You can't cater to the media. You've got to write your own agenda. They're very seductive, and it would be very easy to try to develop only questions that are going to appeal to them. ... You've got to get the message out, but the media aren't your only connection to the public and we do use question period material, questions and answers, in mailings and other things as well.

The advantage of mailing Question Period information is that parties are able to target who they wish to receive the information. The New Democrats often distribute the Liberals' questions to selected groups or constituencies in order to contrast

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[33] Interview with Don Wanagas.

[34] Interview with Bettie Hewes.

their own policy positions.

Question Period is really geared towards many audiences, especially for government members. Since cabinet and caucus discussions are held in confidence, Question Period provides a forum for members to publicly affirm to their constituents that they are working on an issue. Question Period is also a proving ground for politicians. The ability to "stand and deliver" is valued in every caucus. Question Period can signal a desire to be named to cabinet. Two studies of backbenchers found that those members "with keener ambitions were less likely to focus their attention on particular decisions or on narrowly defined policy areas".[36] Cabinet ministers are also not immune to using Question Period for purposes other than replying to opposition criticism. During the week preceding the Progressive Conservative annual convention, several cabinet ministers used question period to subtly, but publicly affirm their support of Premier Getty, who faced a possible leadership review.

One often forgotten and little studied part of Question Period is the direct audience. On any given day, over 100 people are in the private and public galleries, and the potential audience watching or listening to Question Period broadcast live on Access Radio and community cable television channels includes most of the province. Over 650,000 households in Alberta can receive the television broadcast through the cable hookup.

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[36] White, The Ontario Legislature: A Political Analysis, page 35.

No ratings are kept on the viewership of either the provincial or federal Question Periods, but a 1986 Environics survey[36] found that 13 per cent of all Canadians watched live or taped coverage of the House of Commons debates or Question Period at least once a week. Taped highlights on news broadcasts reached 46 per cent of Canadians at least once a week. Alberta was found to have the highest provincial rate of viewership of the taped highlights at 56 per cent. The survey also studied the effects of television on Canadians' attitudes towards legislators. Most respondents to the survey felt that television had no effect on their interest in government or their respect towards legislative institutions and their members; but again, the largest effect was seen in Alberta. Albertans were the most likely to have lost interest in government (19 per cent) and to have lost respect for their representatives (57 per cent) thanks to televised debates. With these results, there seem to be some grounds to Speaker David Carter's concerns about television as the medium that provides people with most of their news. "The problem is viewers don't distinguish between Ottawa and Edmonton", Dr. Carter claims.[37]

Opinions on the effect of television vary among the Members of the Legislative Assembly. Pam Barrett says that she changed her supportive "heckling" after she became known as Pam Barrett

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[36] Michael Adams, "Canadian Attitudes Towards Legislative Institutions" in Canadian Legislatures: The 1986 Comparative Study (Toronto: Queen's Park, 1986), pages 25 to 32.

[37] Dolphin, The Alberta Legislature: a celebration, p. 48.

"right on Ray". Bettie Hewes is not convinced that viewers listen carefully to the substance of the questions. Viewers pick up impressions: the control, articulation, or even the colour of her dress. Ray Speaker finds that a number of people in his constituency listen to Question Period, particularly in the spring on the tractor radio. If an issue really interests them, they will comment on what he said in the House.

Until further study is done in this area, political strategists will continue to rely on the media, not as a means to communicate directly to citizens, but as a faulty filter through which Albertans receive their information on how our parliamentary democracy works.

An Assessment of Question Period

The subtitle to this essay is "Alberta's Legislature Grows Up". The changes to Question Period over the past twenty-five years reflect the changes to the political culture of this province. Majority government is still the norm, but now the three traditional parties hold all the seats in the Legislature, mirroring the political alignment in several of the other provinces. Protest parties have a long and successful history in this province, however, and so the stability of this alignment is not assured. The important point is that the Legislature's rules and traditions have accommodated the political realignment through a series of rounds of bargaining between the parties. Question Period, and the legislative agenda as a whole, still remain very

much in the hands of the government compared to other provincial legislatures, but this is to be expected in a province that has had years of huge majority governments. Further bargaining could see a lessening of this predominance, and one could expect the standing orders to be amended if a minority government should ever be elected.

Along with its procedural growing pains, Alberta's Legislature has suffered under the glare of misplaced media attention. During the legislative session, just when the scrutiny of the government's total actions needs to be broadened and deepened, does the media focus on one part of the total work of the Legislature, and so follow the opposition parties. Several times this session both the opposition and the media have been slow to pick up on the implications of government actions, not because the information was not publicly available, or that it was difficult to understand, but because it was not featured in the spotlight -- Question Period.

On the positive side, the partisan political dimension of the longer preambles adds to the value of the questions. Politics is about making choices, and as the examination of the subjects of questions showed, parties do emphasize the issues they feel are important. It is up to the media to report these differences, across the province, and not just in Edmonton.

Finally, while Question Period may not be "the most significant proceeding in a legislature" it is an essential part of our democracy by increasing the accountability of government to the citizens of the province. The repercussions from questions,

and even the preparation for questions that are never asked make Jean-Luc Pepin's words ring true for both the government and the opposition parties:[38] "the fear of Question Period is the beginning of political wisdom".

[38] Kalnay, "Meeting the Onslaught", p. 7.

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